

ONETOWATCH



Jamie Breese

As Only Connect prepares to celebrate its 21st birthday at Colston Hall on 28 June, MD Jamie Breese gives us the lowdown on Bristol's premier networking organisation

Please tell us a little about Only Connect – when did it begin?

It all started over six years ago, here in Clifton. For a few summers I would throw rooftop drinks parties and I found that powerful connections were being made between my guests socially, and in business terms too. Friendships were forged and business links cast. In early 2008, I formalised it and 'ran the first Only Connect from a chic, hired venue and the rest is history. Bristol is cordially invited!

What are its main aims?

My key priority is to stick to the company dictum: "business and social networking combined". We go to enormous lengths to ensure between 500-600 guests attend, and we aim to create a sophisticated red-carpet occasion that acts as a springboard for further contact. In the early days it was all 'c's' – contacts, canapés, champagne, chocolate, co-hosts and connections!



Jamie with the Lord Mayor at the last Only Connect

●● We've heard it described as a 'real-world Twitter' and 'unique' – what makes it so?

We are fundamentally social creatures, but actual human face-to-face contact is slowly being threatened by tech. Call me old-fashioned, but business people are proven to be far more likely to do business with somebody they've actually met. We provide an elegant, real-world for an attractive price: a magical event, where the barriers come down and people get to meet each other in stunning venues. Our uniqueness is the fact we use a number of experienced co-hosts whose job it is to build connections and we use an epic, almost ball-like experience, to bring like-minded business people together.

●● What kind of business people have joined, and what do you think they get out of it?

We have welcomed many thousands of guests over the 21 Bristol Only Connect events. Our very first guest through the door of the first event was broadcaster Justin Lee Collins and since that time, we've welcomed all manner of successful business leaders, established professionals and emerging talent: everyone from Wales's biggest landowner (and Secret Millionaire) Kevin Green,

to Members of Parliament such as Charlotte Leslie and Stephen Williams. We've had repeat distinguished guests such as Major General James Short of Augmentor, and leading CEOs. We've had creatives from Bristol's biggest companies such as Aardman and the BBC, and many thousands of small-to-medium business owners who share our passion for people. Our sponsors get exposed to an incredible array of sectors.

●● What do you feel have been its biggest successes?

I truly believe that Only Connect has been an asset to Bristol and the West Country in general. The very fact that we started out just as the recession began, and have grown bigger and better each and every time is just a magical thing to my mind. The biggest stamp of approval came when Enterprise Network Europe and later Business West became our long-term headline sponsors. I'm a huge advocate of Bristol, and it's Bristol alone which has allowed us to flourish.

●● What is your role in Only Connect?

Truthfully, I set up the company initially as something fun to do: a passion project in-between my 'day' jobs. If you haven't got the passion – forget it. I spent three months, mostly full-time, prepping

our Christmas event. As the Managing Director, I still cut the deals and am very hands-on, and I get to meet and know so many people in our city.

●● Was the last Only Connect a success? Can you give us an idea of how many attended?

We normally hold five to six events per year with the odd Only Select. The last event was our Christmas Connections, held at the ultra-chic Living Room on Bristol's harbourside. We welcomed 540 guests in black tie, were sponsored by companies such as Aston Martin Broughtons and Krispy Kreme, and The Lord Mayor drew our charity raffle. For me, it was an amazing occasion and the post-event feedback about the deals done, and the fun had, blew us away.

●● What are the rules of Only Connect?

The only rule is simply this – everybody has the right to approach anybody else and start a conversation.

●● We believe you have a bit of a special party lined up; why hold it at Colston Hall?

Colston Hall has been in my sights for several years. The possibilities of the amazing new multi-level foyer has presented an epic opportunity I couldn't say



Jamie Breese with BBC1 presenter Nick Knowles, former SAS Major broadcaster Ken Hames of Farscape Development, and film director John Miller at Only Connect 18



Guests at Only Connect 18

no when their new event manager approached us recently. It's the appropriate place for our 21st birthday! We have three times the capacity, far more bar space, a floor for speed networking and the chance to exclusively take over one of the West's most iconic venues for the evening of 28 June. Bentley of Cheltenham are sponsoring this event and we have acres of space at the front to showcase... and dazzle.

●● As well as being a businessman, you are a columnist, a TV presenter, filmmaker and charity worker – have we left anything out?

I love variety in life. I've been a columnist at *The Sunday Mirror* and a TV presenter for 12 years now. I started out in 1999 co-hosting a show with Fiona Bruce called *The Antiques Show* which was made at BBC Bristol but for network BBC2. Jump forward, to this last year, I've been reviewing

the papers for Sky News and shooting two big shows in America – one's a primetime series currently airing over there on The Discovery Channel called *Auction Kings*. Discovery is the world's biggest non-fiction media company and the show is ultimately aired worldwide. You get fans from Australia rolling up to set, which is cool. I'm currently Gumtree.com's public spokesperson which is great fun. I work occasionally for UNICEF, Mencap, The Make-A-Wish Foundation and others as a charity auctioneer in my spare time and have helped raise over £250,000 in 16 months. Locally I support charities like Penny Brohn and Sue Ryder Care.

●● Which of these roles gives you the most satisfaction?

I think film-making is the one thing which requires the most effort and also provides the most satisfaction. I've made a few shorts in Bristol as writer, producer



Jamie with sponsors Aston Martin Broughtons at the last Only Connect event

and director. A few years ago, I was lucky enough to sign what's called a 'first look' deal with Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks studios in Hollywood.

●● Describe a typical day...

I absolutely have no typical day – and I guess that stems from the variety I've worked hard to find.

●● What's the best piece of advice anyone has ever given you in business?

A mentor once instilled 'fortune favours the brave'. My friend and agent John Miles is about as solid as they come. He once said to me: success in life is not measured by how much you've got, but how happy you are. So simple. So true.

●● And a tip you'd pass on to others?

In short, always be fair and aim to provide the best possible service. Integrity in business stands the test of time.

Where would you take a colleague for a business lunch in Bristol?

It would have to be Bristol's Buttery on the harbourside: have you tried the bacon butty there? If it's a group, then I like the Bistro at Hotel Du Vin or perhaps The Lido, among many.

●● Do you have any as yet unfulfilled ambitions?

I am working at getting my first driving licence this summer...

●● What's the biggest mistake you've ever made... and your biggest success?

The biggest recent mistake in business was probably not growing Only Connect fast enough elsewhere as it's a brand which has only improved year on year. The biggest success, for me, was to never give up and to maintain my passion for the liberal arts and creative work, with business. I hope the best is yet to come.

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